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## THE CASE OF THE RUNAWAY MEETING

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The case describes the plight of a principal as she attempts to oversee her school's equity/inclusive mandate. Bernice first realizes the strength of the opposition to inclusion at a staff meeting where a couple of vocal teachers are cheered on by the rest of the staff as they voice their dissatisfaction with her suggestion that students and their parents be included in a decision about next year's schedule. Bernice is now in the position of having to figure out how to get the equity/inclusion mandate back on track. The case includes four teaching points and exercises. The first exercise explores the issue of acquiring knowledge of the setting while the second addresses the actions that might be taken. The third and fourth activities target the kinds of things that the principal should have done and the arguments that she can use to convince her staff of the value of parental and student involvement in school decision-making.

Bernice could only shake her head as she helplessly watched the spectacle unfold before her. Just about everyone at this monthly staff meeting was standing and applauding as John Beecham, one of the more vocal teachers on staff, brought his animated monologue to a close. He was responding to Bernice's suggestion that students and their parents should be involved in the decision about next year's school schedule. John's arguments against such a practice followed a familiar refrain—students were not responsible enough to make such an important decision, they did not know enough to make a good decision, and they should not be involved in the decision. He also felt that the parents of “these students” were similarly ill equipped to make these kinds of decisions; he believed that they knew little about the issues and did not want them to think that they had the right to interfere in the business of the school.

Beecham was not the only one to take the floor to speak out against Bernice's initiative. He merely followed on the heels of Riley Jackson who had voiced some of the same arguments. Bernice was not really surprised at what these two had to say. She had heard their opinions about the students before; the fact that they held a deficit view of some of the students was not a secret. But what shocked her most was the response of the rest of the staff; she certainly had not foreseen their enthusiastic support for Beecham and Jackson. And while the rest of the room applauded, she stood in stunned silence and wondered how things could have gotten to this point.

Bernice had been on the job about five years. Almost sixty months ago—a lifetime it seemed now—the superintendent of schools had called and offered her the principalship of William Ballentine Secondary School. At the time, she was thrilled to accept the offer, and pleased to hear in the time since then that she had been handpicked for the job. William Ballentine was a special school, the only one in the entire district that openly advertised its commitment to equity, social justice, and inclusion. Bernice assumed that despite her inexperience as a principal, it was her equity work at the district level that had prompted the offer. But it was at times like these that she wondered about the wisdom of accepting the position. Five years into the job she worried about her ability to take on such a role. She also worried about the future of the school. Could she ensure that this school would carry out its equity mandate? If the principal of a school that has a particular focus on equity and social justice was not able to carry out inclusive practices how could principals in other schools be expected to do so? And what about the students and their parents? Was there any hope for marginalized students if a school like William Ballentine could not make a place for them?

William Ballentine had adopted an equity platform over ten years ago. The district superintendent at the time had believed that something had to be done about the inadequate

schooling arrangements in the area, a community that was home to many poor and working class families. Because there was no high school in the area, their sons and daughters had to travel considerable distances in order to attend school. Unfortunately, this arrangement did not work out for many of them. Scores of students dropped out well before graduation, and many of those who did attend did so sporadically. After considerable thought and effort, the superintendent managed to get approval for the construction of a new school, one that would hopefully help turn things around in the neighborhood and would do so with a focus on equity and inclusion.

With inclusive principles in mind, the first administrators hired teachers who also believed in inclusion and equity. Many of the latter were from the local area, had experience teaching in working class community schools, and had seen first-hand the unfair way poor and working class students had been treated by educators with whom they worked. Over the course of their careers, they had observed that many educators held negative stereotypical views of the poor, routinely excluding both students and parents from the best of what the schools had to offer—from curricular options to decision-making processes. And so the new teachers were hired because they seemed determined to rectify these injustices. They were committed to making the school an equitable and inclusive place that was welcoming for all students and parents, a school where everyone would be included in the key school activities.

Even though there had been many obstacles along the way, the school had initially blossomed. The community embraced the school's inclusive philosophy and William Ballentine had over the years become a model for inclusion and equity. Educators came from far and near to see what the school was doing and to talk to educators, parents, and students alike. However, things had changed at William Ballentine in the five years since Bernice had taken up her position. The most significant was the growth in the student population—it was now twice the

size that it was five years ago. From a student body of 600 and a teaching staff of 35, it had expanded to include 1190 students and 72 teachers. The extra students were housed in 20 portables, and the central district office had plans in place for an expansion of the current building. There were a number of reasons for this change. The most significant was the growth in the community that the school served. Like the school, the community population had doubled. Many of the new residents had been displaced by various re-gentrification projects and had taken advantage of a civic relocation plan to move from the various parts of the city and settle here. A number of the planned public housing projects were now completed, with more planned for the near future. Along with working class families, the new housing projects also attracted recent immigrants, and many were refugees.

Bernice had to move fast to keep up with the rapid increase in enrolment. Among other things, she found herself struggling to hire enough new teachers that fit with the equity mandate. To her dismay, she discovered that it was not easy to find teachers who were genuinely committed to equity. Many teachers used appropriate language in the interviews and seemed committed to increasing equity, but once they started working they displayed a superficial commitment. For instance, these teachers were willing to be involved in cultural celebrations, but rejected initiatives that more directly redressed longstanding inequities. Bernice did not have a problem finding teachers to be involved in food and clothing drives for local charities. However, it was difficult to find volunteers for the after school homework club for students and their parents, or the before and after school English program. Bernice also found herself in discussions with teachers who held a decidedly negative view of students and their parents. Some of the very same teachers who had claimed they were committed to equitable student engagement in their interviews were not displaying the level of commitment to equity and social justice in their work

that Bernice had expected. Bernice, however, attributed these tendencies to the realities of adjusting to a new school.

Many of the new teachers also approached their work in different ways than the veteran staff members. One of these differences was associated with their places of residence. In the past, virtually all the teachers had lived in the local community. They were part of the community, and as such, they took part in many community activities. The teachers knew many of the local people outside of the school relationship; they met them in grocery stores, on the street, and at sporting events. The same could not be said of the newer teachers. The new hires did not see fit to take up residence in the community. Instead most preferred to commute a considerable distance each day to school. This meant that they did not arrive until 15 minutes before the start of school, and left soon after the school day ended. This also contributed to reluctance to participating in evening or weekend extra-curricular activities, and unwillingness to be involved in community activities. A number appeared to take little interest in the community and the religious and cultural practices of the people who lived there.

Bernice also began to notice other changes in teacher attitudes to their work as the new hires became more engrained in the culture of the school. She began to get hints that equity was not a priority for some teachers. Other issues, like student discipline, community practices, and academic standards and test scores, seemed to surface regularly in the one-on-one meetings she had with teachers, in her casual conversations and occasionally at staff meetings. At the latest school improvement plan meeting some of the team members had expressed concerns that the school goals were not helping them attain the level of academic success they wanted to with their students. More than this though, Bernice began to hear complaints about the school's equity focus. She had overheard a couple of conversations in the hall, and one of the secretaries told her

about the objections from two of the newer teachers about what they saw as the school's "unhealthy preoccupation" with equity. The complaints had come from a newly hired veteran teacher from another school who had recently taken some of the younger teachers under his wing, and another who claimed she was a personal friend of the current superintendent. Bernice remarked at the time about how quickly staff dynamics were changing with the new staff, but did not think much about it. After all, complaints were pretty common in the schools in which she had taught in the past, and she felt that such behavior was to be expected. Bernice also did not believe that what she perceived to be isolated complaints could threaten an equity agenda that was so firmly entrenched. But now many months later, it appeared that she might have been wrong.

Bernice's misjudgment of the current state of affairs at William Ballentine was now becoming apparent to her in vivid clarity as she faced significant opposition to her idea to involve students and parents in the planning for next year's schedule in the staff meeting. Taking for granted staff's equity-mindedness, she had assumed that teachers would support the involvement of parents and students. For Bernice, their participation could help students learn. She believed that this would be a great opportunity to appeal to some of the students who were currently less interested and engaged in school. Some of the parents had discussed their concerns with Bernice about their students' struggles with school. They had described how they did not feel the curriculum was as relevant to their children as it could be. Some of the parents had also complained to Bernice that they did not feel all of the teachers were supportive of their children. Bernice had a few ideas about what could be done to change things for the better. She felt they needed to expand on what the school was offering to ensure they were appealing to and engaging as many students as possible. Before Bernice moved forward with any of her ideas, she wanted

to hear more from the parents and students, and she thought that this staff meeting was the ideal place to talk about these ideas. But she had obviously misjudged the situation and the meeting was turning out to be a watershed event not only for the equity program, but for her own career.

As Bernice stood in front of her staff, she thought to herself that everything had come down to this moment—she was sitting on the precipice. Beecham had finished his rant and the entire room had turned to her, expecting her to speak. What was she to say? How could she hope to influence a group of people who were obviously hostile to her way of thinking and to the school's long established philosophy? Was this the time to try to persuade the staff of the benefits of including students and parents in decisions? The bigger issue, however, revolved around the equity mission. How had it gotten off track? And how could she get it back to where it once was?

### **Teaching Points**

Bernice is not the only principal who faces these kinds of issues. Many administrators who promote inclusion, social justice, and equity also encounter similar difficulties. It is not always easy to introduce, implement, and sustain equity initiatives in schools. One of the reasons this happens is because equity-minded administrators regularly face resistance from various constituencies in their school communities. Some of this resistance is planned and overt (Datnow, 1998). But some is also inadvertent, sponsored by unwitting and well-intentioned individuals who do not always realize that their favored reform initiative, program proposal, or policy works against already marginalized groups (Ryan, 2010; Taylor, 2006). The bottom line here is that equity-minded educators have their work cut out for them. But if they are to

experience any success with these endeavors they will have to find ways to counter resistance to equity and inclusion.

A key in countering this resistance is to judiciously use “political” or “micropolitical” skills. Educators, students, and parents work, live, and learn in contested institutional environments where individuals and groups pursue particular interests. What interests prevail depends upon the ways in which power and influence are exercised. If administrators hope to influence what happens in their institutions, then they have to find ways to judiciously marshal and exercise power, that is, they need to be political. This does not mean that they have to engage in unethical, covert, or self-serving activity. But administrators will need to be aware of how things get done in their organizations and what actions they have to take to promote what they believe is important. While action is important, so is knowledge. In order to meet their goals, political actors will have to possess and exercise political wisdom or acumen (McGinn, 2005). According to the much-maligned godfather of micropolitics, Nicholo Machiavelli (1952, 1997), wisdom is a key pillar in any leader’s political arsenal. Three central elements are associated with the exercise of political acumen. These include: (1) understanding the political environment; (2) using knowledge of the political environment in strategies that are employed; and (3) monitoring the results of the political strategies (Ryan, 2010).

In considering how Bernice ought to proceed, it makes good sense to acknowledge the contested political environment in which she works and the necessity of assessing it and taking action on the basis of this knowledge. How can, or should, Bernice understand her organization? How can, or should, Bernice understand the players in her organization? How can, or should, Bernice understand the policies at play in her organization? Given this knowledge, what mistakes did she make along the way and what she can learn from them? What future actions can she



take? How might she employ her political acumen with the issues that currently confront her?  
And what might she learn from her new actions?

The following exercises are designed for graduate classes in educational leadership or for professional development activities for educators. The first exercise explores the issue of acquiring knowledge of the setting while the second addresses the actions that might be taken. The third and fourth activities target the kinds of things that the principal should have done and the arguments that she can use to convince her staff of the value of parental and student involvement in school decision-making.

*Teaching Exercise 1: What Is Going on Here?*

Instructors are to have students read Ryan (2010) after reading the case study. In particular, they need to know about the kinds of things that politically minded administrators must understand in their school communities and what they do to acquire this knowledge. They are then to individually answer the following questions. The group then comes together to hammer out what they believe are the best answers to these questions. The instructor lists the questions for all to see and the group debates what the best answers to the questions are. The questions include:

- What individuals and groups are able to influence what happens at William Ballentine Secondary School?
- What are their goals or interests?
- What kind of power do they exercise?
- How do they exercise their power?
- What effect is this exercise of power having on . . . ?
- What kind of power does Bernice have?
- How can she exercise this power?
- What affect is this exercise of power having on . . . ?

- What is the best way of finding out about these issues?

*Exercise 2: What to Do?*

Instructors are to have students read the three articles below after reading the case. The class is to be divided into groups of four. Next, the groups come up with a plan of action for Bernice. In doing so, they need decide upon a set of strategies and the potential obstacles and pitfalls that Bernice may encounter when implementing these strategies. Groups then present their plans to the entire group. The class discusses strengths and weaknesses of each set of strategies.

*Reading Resources*

- Ryan (2010), “Promoting Social Justice in Schools: Principals' Political Strategies.”
- Shields (2004), “Dialogic Leadership for Social Justice: Overcoming Pathologies of silence.”
- Theoharis (2007), “Social Justice Educational Leaders and Resistance: Toward a Theory of Social Justice Leadership.”

*Exercise 3: What Should Have Been Done?*

Bernice made some mistakes along the way. She would not necessarily have been in the situation that she was if she had done things differently. In this exercise, instructors are to ask students to rank the mistakes that Bernice made and come up with alternate actions that would have been more appropriate. Students will compile their own lists. When they are done, they will share them with the class, debate the seriousness of her mistakes and come up with a list of more appropriate strategies.

*Reading Resources*

- Ryan (2010), “Promoting Social Justice in Schools: Principals' Political Strategies.”
- Shields (2004), “Dialogic Leadership for Social Justice: Overcoming Pathologies of Silence.”
- Theoharis (2007), “Social Justice Educational Leaders and Resistance: Toward a Theory of Social Justice Leadership.”

*Exercise 4: Student and Community Involvement*

The issue that precipitated the opposition in the staff meeting was student and community involvement in decision-making. If Bernice is going to have a chance at turning the tide over this issue, she is going to have to convince the staff that this involvement is a good thing. Indeed an important micropolitical strategy is the ability to persuade others (Ryan, 2010). So Bernice needs to know enough about parent and student involvement to sway them to her way of thinking. Does she have knowledge or facts that would support her position? What can she do to educate or persuade the staff about student involvement? How can she put together an argument that can convince staff of the sense of including parents and students in decisions about the schedule?

Instructors are to organize a debate in the class. The resolution to be debated is: Be it resolved that including students and parents in school decisions is good for the whole education community. The class is divided into three groups. Group 1 argues for the resolution. It will choose three students to present arguments. The remaining students assist the debaters with their arguments. Group 2 argues against the resolution. The third group adjudicates the debate, evaluating the arguments of the two groups.

### *Debate Procedures*

1. Speeches are a maximum of 3 minutes in length.
2. A member of the affirmative teams speaks first, followed by a member of the negative team, and so on.
3. Each team is given 10 minutes to construct a rebuttal, which is to be delivered by one team member.
4. The rebuttals are a maximum of 3 minutes in length.
5. After the rebuttals each team has the option of delivering a 1-minute final statement.
6. The third group has 10 minutes to evaluate the debate, choosing two people to deliver the respective assessments of each team.
7. Evaluations should consider the content, argument, and presentation of each teams performance.
8. Teams will be expected to field questions from the audience/evaluators and the opposing team.
9. All participants are to conduct themselves in a professional manner, show respect for others' views, and target arguments rather than individuals.

(For a range of debating formats see <http://idebate.org/about/debate/formats> )

### *Reading Resources*

- Brooker and Macdonald (1998), “Did We Hear You? Issues of Student Voice in a Curriculum Innovation.”
- Mitra (2004), “The Significance of Students: Can Increasing “Student Voice” in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?”
- Smyth (2006), ““When Students Have Power’: Student Engagement, Student Voice, and the Possibilities for School Reform Around ‘Dropping Out’ of School.”

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